NO MAN IS AN ISLAND
World Communion Meditation
Philippians 4:4-9
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The late Will Campbell, ~~Southern Baptist preacher who was~~ Director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen ~~and an employee of the National Council of Churches~~ during the ~~heat and violence of the~~ Civil Rights Movement, wrote a very poignant account of his family's beginnings in rural Mississippi, and his relationship with his older brother. "Brother to a Dragonfly" is the title of the book - a touching and ~~tragic~~ sad and triumphant and thoroughly Christian story.

Early in the book Campbell recalls vignettes from his childhood which contributed later to his theological maturity. In 1933, one of his uncle's tenant farmers was shot. He and his brother ran immediately to the small shack where ~~he~~ the man lived and took their places in the crowd which had gathered. He remembers vividly (in the distance "sounds we had never heard before":) -someone said, ("that's his mamma.") Listen to Campbell's description. Squatting down on their haunches

"The mother was surrounded by an entourage of a dozen women or so. They were supporting her from falling. The dominant sound we heard was the wails, the moans, the shrieks, the whimpering of the mother...The sounds were backed up by the more subdued ones of her supporters...

"The mother shouted.

'Lord!'

"Those supporting her picked up with the refrain as in a litany.

~~'Lord!'~~

'Jeesus!'

"Now the echo. Softly, 'Jesus.'

'[redacted]'

'[redacted]'

'[redacted] Lord Jesus!'

'Lord Jesus'

'O Jesus, Bring my baby home'

"Bring im home.'

The entourage stopped and stood in a semi-circle around the body of her dead son. ("Now it was unmistakable crying... the broken heart of a mother and her sisters, calling their hurt to the world.") She knelt by her son and daubed his face with her apron. ("Somehow she knew when it was time to go.") And off they went with the incantations beginning again.

Campbell wrote, "We watched them until they were out of sight. And listened until they were out of hearing. And we listened for a long time after that...Whether West African or European, Nigerian or Mississippian in origin, the sounds were the pleading of a peasant woman to the son of a Jewish peasant woman to be with her in her travail...

They were Jesus sounds...And they were sounds which would not soon depart from us." (p. 59-62, Brother to a Dragonfly)

I read that book while I was in Scotland this summer. And I read that particular passage about the time I was privileged to preside at the funeral of Mrs. Harkness, who was born, reared and lived in Moffat for 87 years; who had a husband, and children and grandchildren and friends; who liked to sew and bake and go to church and who was buried amidst the same love

grief that is the lot of the entire human family. How related we are in this! In birth and in death, we are more human, more related, more of a family than at any other time. It is the same for all of us. In a way more profound than scholastic language can describe, human beings sense something of their oneness with the whole human family in the miracle of birth and the finality of death.

John Donne, English poet, later churchman and Dean of St. Paul's, was obsessed by the thought the older and sicker and closer to death he became. He wrote - out of his own illness:

> "No man is an island, entire of itself;
> every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
> if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...
> any man's death dimishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee." (Devotions XVII)

There it is again: the oneness of humanity, most apparent, most immediate, most meaningful, in death. "No man is an island." It's not surprising that the thought doesn't occur to us until we're ready to die; because there is so much about us built on the opposite premise.. "Every man and woman is, or ought to be, an island: strong, independent, autonomous, free, not dependent on any other island, able to sustain itself, to stand alone, self reliant, self aware, self directed." That's the litany of the cultural religion that informs us today.

The new and accepted model of personhood is the individual who needs no one, who has made it on his own or her own, who does his or her own thing with strength, and confidence. Pop culture has incarnated the image in the western hero who rides into town alone, sleeps and eats alone, speaks to no one, kills a lot of people and rides off, alone. Politicians know the immense appeal of the idea of a splendidly isolated america, able to stand alone, dependent on no one. And in terms of intimate relationships pastors' studies and psychiatrists' offices are the places where the self-inflicted pain is articulated. ("He doesn't need me", "She doesn't think she needs anyone." "He wants to be free: she wants to find herself.")

Somewhere along the line we have believed a great lie, namely that we will find ourselves only in ourselves; that our salvation lies somewhere in the depths of our own private being. And somewhere we have surrounded that untruth with religious words: "My religion is my own private affair: I can worship God by myself, thank you: I really don't have any need for the church."

Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk who spent much of his life in solitude wrote: "What every man looks for is his own salvation. By salvation I mean the full discovery of who he himself really is. I mean also the discovery that he cannot find himself in himself alone, but that he must find himself in and through others." (No Man Is An Island, p. 11)

Now, there is a lot about the current celebration of the individual that is healthy. And there is a lot about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that gives the individual dignity and power and confidence. But at its very heart the Gospel, and the Judeo/Christian tradition, begins with the assertion that we, all of us, are a family. We are related - as brothers and sisters, children of one father. The Gospel sees the human dilemma as a family failure: the children cut themselves off from the father, the very first result of which is an internal family feud. In the Genesis story Adam and Eve ~~cut~~ severs the tie with God, and one of their son's murders the other. In its simplest form, that is our diagnosis.

(*) What we sense about our unity in birth + death is the divine reality for life in between.

Over it is the divine intent, the will of God for his creation, the eternal hope. (*) The prophet Isaiah, centuries before Christ, saw a ~~p~~segment of it: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees...and he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples." (Isaiah 25) St. Paul, writing to the early Christians in the Greek city of Philippi, urged them to make common cause with goodness wherever they encountered it in their pagan world: "Whatever is true, honorable, pure, lovely, gracious - think about these things." And Jesus, in a memorable image we remember in our own liturgy, "Men will come from East and West, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13:29)

That is the word of the Lord: the will of God for his creation. God sent his son for that: not simply to guarantee

individual salvation, safety and security for a collection of otherwise unrelated individuals, but to reunite the family again. He is God's host at the family reunion, the anniversary dinner party, the time when we get together again and laugh and cry and rejoice that we are who we are, that we are related, that we have one father.

That is what we are about today, World Communion Sunday. In the face of the isolation that separates individuals, the provincialism that divides communities, the bigotry that separates races, the chauvinism that is a barrier between nations and cultures, we are daring to celebrate, for a brief moment in time, the word of the Lord, the simple idea th[illegible]r, that we are one family, and that for our own salvation, our wholeness, we need an anothe[illegible].

In Scot. Comm. is celebrated infrequently - known as "the occasion"

→ It is "the occasion", my friends in Scotland say. Several hours ago they observed it, with fine white linen, and a common silver goblet, and with great solemnity and dignity. It is the "repeatable sign of hope" German theologian Juergen Moltmann says. And today, also, in Belfast, N. Ireland brothers and sisters, Roman Catholic and Protestant will drink from one cup and eat from one loaf, above and in the midst of b[illegible] the suffering and tragedy and violence and hatred: a sign of hope: a banquet, the host of which is the Lord of the whole church and the whole world. It is a special occasion for us, for we will be gathered at table, with a new brother, and as we receive the elements from his hands we will be trying to say that we share the pain of that part of our family: that we participate in the agony of Northern Ireland: that we share the hope - the hope of World Communion

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the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the hope of a new humanity in Christ, a family, reunited, in joy and love and peace, rejoicing in one another. (*)

Men and women will come from East and West and from North and South and sit at table in the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

God, our father, forgive our divisions. Forgive our pride through which we isolate ourselves from others. Bless your whole church this day. Come among us with healing and power and peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(*) We experience it in birth + death: we know our common humanity at the perimeters of life. We felt it as our President turned to an Israeli and Egyptian and quoted Jesus - "Blessed are the Peacemakers". We sense it today as our Roman Catholic Brothers + Sisters grieve again for a fallen leader. We are one in Jesus Christ. We experience, in God's love a oneness the world needs desperately.

That is the hope - and the promise of World Communion.